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Joint Inspection Unit

Report of the Joint Inspection Unit on the involvement of civil society organizations other than non-governmental organizations and the private sector in technical cooperation activities: experiences and prospects of the United Nations system

Note by the Secretary-General**

Addendum

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit for the consideration of the General Assembly his comments, and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Involvement of civil society organizations other than NGOs and the private sector in technical cooperation activities: experiences and prospects of the United Nations system." (JIU/REP/2002/1) (A/57/118).

* A/57/150.

** The present note is being submitted after the deadline in view of the time required for extensive consultation with all the organizations of the United Nations system.

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Summary

The present note contains the comments of the Secretary-General, and those of the relevant organizations of the United Nations system members of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) entitled "Involvement of civil society organizations other than NGOs and the private sector in technical cooperation activities: experiences and prospects of the United Nations system" (JIU/REP/2002/1) (A/57/118). Members of CEB generally support the overall conclusions and recommendations of the JIU report and agree that civil society organizations (CSOs) are increasing in significance and that there is an advantage in working with them, especially in the field of technical activities in developing countries. They do, however, have their own definition of CSOs which is distinct from that suggested in the JIU report. They also believe that approaches to furthering collaboration with CSOs should focus on operational and programmatic objectives and not be process oriented. This note offers responses on specific recommendations made in the JIU report.

I. Introduction

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) entitled "Involvement of civil society organizations other than NGOs and the private sector in technical cooperation activities: experiences and prospects of the United Nations system" (A/57/118) is an effort by JIU to further expand its work on the issues concerning collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs)[1] in recognition of the growing role of this category of development actors. It was prepared partly in response to a suggestion from the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), as well as to a number of legislative calls[2] on the need for strengthening the capacity of civil society and non-governmental organization (NGO) involvement, including the appeal in the United Nations Millennium Declaration "to give greater opportunities to the private sector, non-governmental organizations and civil society, in general, to contribute to the realization of the Organization's goals and programmes" (General Assembly resolution 55/2, para. 30).

II. General comments

2. Members of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) welcome the report as an important addition to the body of work on the role played by CSOs in technical cooperation activities of the United Nations system. They note that the report mainly addresses the traditional activities of CSOs, in areas where they have been particularly effective in the past, such as reaching out to specific social groups including women, refugees, disadvantaged groups, and so forth.

3. In general, members of CEB support the conclusions and recommendations of the report and fully endorse its observations that CSOs are increasing in significance and that there are advantages in working with them. Members of CEB acknowledge the need to harness the vibrant energy of civil society in addressing global concerns to build constituencies for advocacy and resource mobilization as well as in the implementation of the system's operational activities. In this context, they fully concur with the report's endorsement of the value of the involvement of CSOs in technical cooperation activities in developing countries. This is particularly valid at the local levels and in the rural areas in developing countries that suffer from resource constraints and weak administrative capacities. Members of CEB also acknowledge that at the country level, community-based organizations are an increasingly important part of support structures for social cohesion, even in conflict situations where more formal political and institutional infrastructure may have eroded.

4. The JIU report deals in a comprehensive manner with the need of the United Nations system to involve CSOs in technical cooperation activities, as well as the implications of that involvement. Members of CEB note in this regard that, within the United Nations system, experiences in developing partnerships with civil society have varied considerably. Some specialized agencies, with regulatory or normative roles, have had long-standing relationships with different elements of civil society for over 50 years. While this cooperation has generally proved to be fruitful, some experiences have, on occasion, dictated tne need for caution in order to avoid potential conflicts of interest.

5. On the issue of the definition of CSOs, members of CEB do not subscribe to a definition that differentiates NGOs and CSOs as two separate categories. Most organizations of the system consider NGOs as part of CSOs as, for example, implied in a definition used by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). In its document entitled "FAO policy and strategy for cooperation with NGOs and other civil society organizations", it stated that the United Nations system's definition of NGOs was broad: all not-for-profit actors were not governmental or intergovernmental; the expansion and diversification of that sector and of its relations with the United Nations, however, was being accompanied by an evolution in terminology. According to FAO, "NGO" now tended to be reserved for formally constituted organizations, which often did not represent sectors of the population but provided services and/or mobilized public opinion in areas of relevance to the United Nations system; the term "civil society" referred to the sphere in which citizens and social movements organized themselves around objectives, constituencies and thematic interests; "civil society organizations" included NGOs and popular organizations — formal and informal — as well as other categories such as the mass media, local authorities, business leaders and the research community; and the term "non-state actors" was even

more comprehensive, also including for-profit businesses.

6. The above reflects a definition adopted by most of the organizations of the United Nations system. In this regard, members of CEB observe that the definition provided in paragraph 12 of the JIU report is not consistent with the definition commonly employed within the system. The characteristics listed in the last sentence do not describe CSOs nor distinguish them from NGOs.

7. Members of CEB, moreover, note that the JIU report concentrates on process issues such as coordination mechanisms, criteria for selecting CSOs as partners, channels of dialogue and establishment of focal points and networking. At the same time, they consider that efforts to improve collaboration with CSOs must be geared to clear operational and programmatic objectives. It appears from the report that there are some clear-cut roles and responsibilities that CSOs are best suited to fulfil. It would thus have been more useful for the report to have clearly delineated the roles and responsibilities between the United Nations and CSOs and clarified the potential mutual benefits that could be capitalized on by both parties.

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

"CSOs should be involved in technical cooperation activities during all stages of programme planning, which includes design, sustainability, implementation/ execution, monitoring and evaluation as well as follow-up (para. 55)."

8. Members of CEB endorse this recommendation on the understanding that CSOs, chosen as partners, satisfy selection criteria such as representativeness, sustainability, transparency and accountability, along with the approval and support of host governments.

Recommendation 2

"(a) A standard framework, which is sufficiently flexible, could be usefully established to be adapted to the different situations and needs of United Nations organizations. This should include the assessment of the legitimacy of representation of any particular CSO, as has been provided for through the guidelines and selection criteria of NGOs, but specific to the nature of CSOs (para. 44);

(b) Organizations particularly active in technical cooperation without a focal point for CSOs should consider appointing one as part of the existing structure (para. 48);

(c) In connection with meetings of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board (CEB) for Coordination (formerly the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC)), consultations among focal points, either directly or through the existing network of the United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (UNGLS) as appropriate, could be envisaged when relevant issues on sustainable development are examined (para. 49)."

9. With regard to recommendation 2 (a) above, members of CEB do not generally support the establishment of a standard framework for technical cooperation with CSOs given the great diversity in the areas of specialization, programmes and activities of the organizations of the United Nations system as well as among the CSOs themselves. CEB also notes in this context that, for many United Nations organizations, NGOs are considered to be a subgroup of CSOs and not a separate category, as suggested by the JIU report.

10. On the issue of guidelines and selection criteria for CSOs, it should be noted that CEB through its former subsidiary body, the Consultative Committee on Programme and Operational Questions (CCPOQ), has already developed two sets of broad generic guidance notes for the United Nations system on operational collaboration with CSOs. The first guidance note, entitled "Administrative Committee on Coordination guidance note for the Resident Coordinator System on operational collaboration with civil society organizations", outlines general considerations for collaboration with CSOs at the country level as well as other specific measures for fostering collaboration, including capacity-building, simplification and harmonization of operational activities, and so forth.

As the title suggests, the note is specifically addressed to the Resident Coordinator System.

11. The second guidance note, entitled "The partnership approach", outlines general principles underpinning the United Nations system's operational collaboration with CSOs, including the enabling environment for such collaboration, the role of sound institutional practices in promoting the partnership approach and broad guidance on managing partnerships in cases where there is a conflict of interest.

12. Concerning recommendation 2 (b) above, members of CEB generally agree that there is value in establishing focal points for CSOs (which should also cover NGOs), particularly where the involvement of CSOs is significant, new and/or where policies and procedures with regard to them are lacking. Many organizations of the United Nations system have already established such focal points.

13. On recommendation 2 (c) above, members of CEB note that NGO/CSO focal points throughout the United Nations system are organized as a network through the Non-Governmental Liaison Service. This cooperative arrangement could indeed facilitate consultation among the focal points on sustainable development issues as well as other issues relevant to the Millennium Declaration in the framework of the discussions of CEB.

Recommendation 3

"(a) Accountability and reporting procedures must be taken into account in the partnership between the United Nations system organizations and CSOs (para. 45);

(b) Even in cases where such a requirement is already pragmatically satisfied in existing agreements, contracts and Staff Rules and Regulations, a policy should be recommended by the legislative organs to develop a common set of principles to guide United Nations system engagement with CSOs (para. 45)."

14. Members of CEB endorse recommendation 3 (a) above on the need for accountability and reporting procedures under the partnership arrangements between United Nations system organizations and CSOs.

15. However, with regard to recommendation 3 (b) above, they do not see the need for legislative organs to develop a common set of principles to guide United Nations system engagement with CSOs. Many organizations of the United Nations system have developed their own internal guidance for cooperation with CSOs, tailored to their own specific needs and, as mentioned in paragraphs 10 and 11 above, broad generic guidelines to underpin the United Nations system's operational collaboration with CSOs have already been established.

Recommendation 4

"(a) Recognize and institutionalize such cooperation to be reflected permanently in its agenda of work and periodically report the results to the Economic and Social Council (para. 64);

(b) Sensitize its High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) in order that, when economic and social issues are considered, the role of CSOs is taken into account (para. 64)."

16. The issue of collaboration with CSOs had been dealt with by the Administrative Committee on Coordination (now United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination) on a number of occasions, notably at its second regular session of 1997 (see ACC/1997/20) and more recently at its second regular session of 1999 (see ACC/1999/20) in the context of the discussions on forging strategic alliances and partnerships with key stakeholders.

17. As mentioned in paragraphs 10 and 11 above, the former subsidiary body of CEB, CCPOQ, had undertaken extensive work on the issue of collaboration with CSOs that resulted in two concrete outputs — the adoption on behalf of CEB of two guidance notes on operational collaboration with CSOs.

18. Members of CEB also note that enhancing collaboration with civil society organizations is explicitly mentioned in the terms of reference of HLCP, which, inter alia, call on the Committee to foster dialogue and propose ways in which the collaboration and interaction with the private sector, NGOs and other parts of civil society can be enhanced and can contribute to the achievement of system-wide goals. CEB intends to continue to pursue the issue of CSOs,

broadly defined to include the NGO component, with a view to building on the results of the work already accomplished by CCPOQ, whose functions have since been subsumed by HLCP.

19. Given that the issue of collaboration with CSOs as defined by most United Nations organizations is of a cross-cutting nature and their involvement in United Nations activities extends beyond technical assistance activities to include advocacy, resource mobilization, and so forth, the consideration of the involvement of CSOs is more than likely to come up in the discussions on follow-up to international conferences and, in particular, the Millennium Summit, which are key features of the terms of reference of HLCP and are, concomitantly, standing items on its agenda.

Recommendation 5

"(a) In order to enable national CSOs to assume further their increasing roles as partners of the system, each organization should make it part of their objective to train and empower CSOs as well as strengthen their organizational structures in terms of legal and managerial capacity, and inform the legislative organs as appropriate (para. 57);

(b) The United Nations system organizations should assist women in general, and those in the developing countries in particular, with appropriate action on training and resource mobilization to enhance their organizational and managerial skills including information technology. Member States and donors should provide financial resources intended for this purpose (para. 88)."

20. Members of CEB support recommendation 5 (a) above and note that many United Nations system organizations are already engaged in capacity-building activities for CSOs in a wide variety of areas within their respective mandates. Some examples of such capacity-building activities are: the creation of a Networking Directory of African NGOs (by the Office of the Special Coordinator for Africa and the Least Developed Countries) as a tool to strengthen regional civil society and limit its dependency on external support through networking; publication of an international directory of CSOs working in drug demand reduction (by the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP)) to help improve interactions/communications among CSOs; and provision of ad hoc grants (e.g. UNDCP) to help CSOs deliver services to their constituencies.

21. With regard to recommendation 5 (b) above, members of CEB, while generally supporting its thrust, note that this recommendation is not specifically related to CSOs and that the recommended steps are subject to funding availability.

Recommendation 6

"(a) The prevailing informal and pragmatic cooperation with CSOs should be better structured through the definition of policy guidelines. This development will give further input to ongoing initiatives by the secretariats and should be translated into policy actions by legislative organs (para. 5);

(b) The financial autonomy of CSOs and their entities, including access to credit, should be encouraged by donors and recipient countries to reduce their dependence on sporadic donations and contributions which undermine their sustainability and potential effectiveness of action (para. 17)."

22. Concerning recommendation 6 (a), members of CEB note that, as mentioned in paragraphs 10 and 11 above, it has already developed, at the level of the system, broad policy guidance for cooperation with CSOs which should include both CSOs and NGOs as the boundaries are not clearly delineated. In addition, several organizations of the United Nations system have developed specific policies and strategies for cooperation with CSOs in their particular fields of competence which, for example in the case of FAO, have been acted upon by its governing body.

23. With respect to recommendation 6 (b) above, CEB notes that it is addressed to donors and recipient countries, and it is not clear what role the organizations of the United Nations system are expected to play in this regard.

Recommendation 7

"(a) Specific staff training is required in development programmes to be approved and

implemented at the national level involving CSOs. The responsibility of training the trainers could also be envisaged (para. 83);

(b) For improvements in United Nations staff training, the United Nations System Staff College in Turin could be one appropriate structure (paras. 52 and 83)."

24. As regards recommendation 7 (a) above, members of CEB agree that training for staff, particularly at the country level involving CSOs, should be included in development plans and budgets, where it is justified, taking into account the significant role CSOs play in United Nations technical cooperation activities and the resource constraints faced by many organizations. Where such training is justified, it should be directed to meeting needs identified by the CSOs themselves and not be limited to adapting their working methods to United Nations procedures.

25. With regard to recommendation 7 (b) above, members of CEB consider that the United Nations System Staff College in Turin could indeed be an appropriate structure for sensitizing and training United Nations staff members in working more effectively with CSOs. Additionally, CEB members observe that it is also important that such sensitization be incorporated in staff briefing and training programmes of individual organizations.

Recommendation 8

"The existing mechanism at the country level has to be revised and amplified, shifting from limited and sporadic consultations to involvement of CSOs during the planning and execution process of technical cooperation activities in synergy with governments (para. 76)."

26. Members of CEB support the suggestion that existing mechanisms such as the common country assessment (CCA) and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) processes should incorporate a continuing dialogue and participation by civil society organizations. It should be noted that the new Integrated Guidelines for CCA and UNDAF specifically provide for the engagement of civil society as a key partner of the programming processes. For example, paragraph 6.1 of the Integrated CCA and UNDAF Guidelines of 22 May 2002 explicitly states that "The United Nations Country Team, led by the Resident Coordinator, ensures the participation of ... civil society organizations, including representatives of the poor and other excluded groups or segments of society...". The United Nations Horn of Africa Initiative, in which FAO is playing the focal point role, provides a concrete example of efforts by the United Nations system to involve NGOs/CSOs.

Recommendation 9

"(a) Those United Nations organizations dealing with economic and social development should be encouraged to include in their web sites selected information on CSOs engaged in technical cooperation activities for the benefit of CSOs in general, and in particular, for those which do not have a web site. For CSOs already equipped with a web site, it would be useful for United Nations system organization web sites to have these CSO hyperlinks imbedded, thereby making it possible to connect readers to the web sites of relevant CSOs;

(b) Major conferences, meetings, seminars/workshops organized by the United Nations system and of special interest to CSOs should be part of the appropriate printed word, radio and web site information."

27. With regard to the above recommendation, members of CEB note that several organizations have to date initiated web sites directed specifically to NGO/CSO partners. These web sites include information on major conferences of interest to these partners. It should be noted that since a vast number of CSOs in developing regions do not have access to the Internet and are not likely to have it in the near future, any effective United Nations/CSO communication strategy must, therefore, incorporate other more accessible means, such as the printed word and radio.

Notes

[1] It is recalled that JIU has produced two earlier reports on this subject, entitled "Working with NGOs: operational activities for development of the United Nations system with non-governmental organizations and governments at the grass-roots and national levels" (JIU/REP/93/1) (A/49/122-E/1994/44) and "Review of financial resources allocated by the United Nations system to activities by non-governmental organizations" (JIU/REP/96/4) (A/51/655-E/1996/105).

[2] See, for example, General Assembly resolutions 46/151, 50/120 and 53/192.